

In Christ, A New Creation

A pastor told this story: Once upon a time there was a hunchbacked dwarf. No one loved him, he was despised and lonely, so he decided to climb a high mountain and kill himself by throwing himself off. As he climbed the mountain, the dwarf met a beautiful young woman who was also climbing the mountain. She said that although many people loved her and found her desirable, the one man she loved did not return her affections. He wanted to marry someone richer. So she too was climbing the mountain to throw herself from the top to her death.

As the dwarf and the beautiful woman climbed together, they met a policeman. The police said that he was in search of a criminal, a notorious robber and murder. There was a huge reward offered for this criminal to be taken dead or alive. Although no one had seen the thief in many years, he would be easy to recognize. This murdered had six fingers on his right hand, and he was rumored to be hiding on that mountain. Half way up the mountain, the dwarf, the woman and the police, had to stop for the night. There was a monastery there. The Abbot, the head monk, was well know for his devout piety, wisdom, and great love of Christ, although he had only been a monk a few short years.

When the threesome knocked on door of the monastery, the Abbot invited them in. The woman knelt to kiss the Abbot's ring, as was the custom, and when she did she saw that he had six fingers on his right hand. The End. Don't you want to know what happened to the dwarf and the woman and the policeman? Did the Abbot get arrested and brought to trial? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It is a miracle that that a notorious thief and murder could become a pious, devout Christian. That's all that matters. Nothing else is as important as that. The past is gone. The future is unknown to us. We live in the grace of the moment – and today is the day of salvation!

The theme of all the lessons assigned for this Fourth Sunday in Lent, the midway point in our Lenten observance, is repentance and forgiveness. The first verse of Psalm 32 sums up that theme so well: “Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!” We all can imagine the joy of the Israelites when they finally arrived in the Promised Land and could at last forget the humiliation their nation had suffered as slaves in Egypt. We can also understand, I’m sure, what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about what Christ does for us when Paul said, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” And Jesus’ foremost parable about forgiveness, the story of The Prodigal Son, which is really more about a loving father, is so very familiar to us as well.

But, in fact, that 32nd Psalm stands out in my mind today as a spectacular declaration and explanation of the human need for repentance, and God’s gift of forgiveness. David was a man after God’s own heart. But he was also a man who sinned grievously. His affair with Bathsheba, and then the murder of her husband Uriah, were the most prominent of his sins. David knew well the consequences of holding un-repentant sin inside us. In his psalm he writes so expertly about the experience of guilt: “While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long. For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.”

The stress and anxiety that sinning brings upon us can make us physically sick. How many people suffer from sleepless night due to thinking about what they have done or not done! The more we try not to think about sinning, the bigger place our sins claim in our hearts, and minds, and gut. Such guilt can kill us. But guilt is not all bad. I would like to distinguish between what I want to call emotional guilt and spiritual guilt. Emotional guilt is that feeling of shame and dread that wounds us psychologically and physically. Spiritual guilt is the experience we have of being separated from God our loving Father.

Spiritual guilt tunes our ears to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and softens up our hearts to receive the Good News that, for Christ's sake, we are forgiven.

David recognized that confession and repentance are necessary to break the cycle of sin and guilt. Again, he wrote: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.'" It's not easy to acknowledge our sin before the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Our inclinations are to either run away, and hide from God, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, or we try to defend ourselves, like Cain after the murder of his brother Abel. Both are losing strategies.

Our only hope is to confess our sins and throw ourselves on the mercy of Almighty God. As sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father, we can speak directly to God as children approach a loving earthly father. We also have the option of confessing to another Christian, a pastor, and hearing God's word of absolution, of forgiveness, spoken through a called and ordained minister of the Word. I was blessed to serve as the confessor at a retreat last week. I heard the confessions of others and made my private confession to another pastor. How good it is to know that your sins are forgiven. David described the great joy of hearing the declaration of our forgiveness this way: "Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!" I would be happy to offer private confession for anyone who desires it. Again, in the Lutheran tradition, private confession is not required, but it is available, and the Lutheran Confessions encourage it.

Once we know we are forgiven, what do we do? We can't keep a good gift like to ourselves. That's something we to let all our friends in on. We want to spread the word of God's amazing grace. We want to be ambassadors for Christ, as Paul calls them. David, speaking to lost sinners, as he once was, put it this way: "I will instruct you and teach you

in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye.” That’s what the Christian life is all about, being forgiven of our sins on account of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and then, as part of the amendment of our lives, making it our business to tell others where they can find forgiveness and the power to change their lives too.

This is a true story I heard from a pastor at the retreat. I think it sums up our theme today rather well. A bride called her pastor just a few weeks after she had been married. She was in tears and said she needed to see the pastor immediately. The pastor had a reputation as being extremely stern and unemotional, but he agreed to see her right away. When they met, she told him that as a young woman she had an affair with a married man. She became pregnant and the man arranged for an abortion. After the abortion their relationship ended. When she fell in love with the man she would later marry, she wanted to tell him about her past, but she procrastinated. When they got engaged, she planned to tell him, but again she delayed. She promised herself she would tell him once they were married, but she could not. Now, whenever her husband looked at her or touched her, her skin just crawled. She felt such shame and remorse.

The pastor listened to her story. Then he directed her to the Individual Confession and Absolution service in the hymnal. They prayed, and she made her confession to him.

“Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you comes from God himself?”

“Yes, I believe.”

“God is merciful and blesses you. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

She sighed, smiled, and said to the pastor, “I guess I have to tell my husband now about my sin.” And the pastor said, “What sin?”

What sin? Our disgrace is rolled away. Christ has removed our sins as far as the east of from the west. We are new creations. God forgets only one thing: our sins. We were lost, but now are found. We were dead, but now we are alive in Christ. Your sins are forgiven, go, and sin no more. “Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD; shout for joy, all who are true of heart.” Amen.